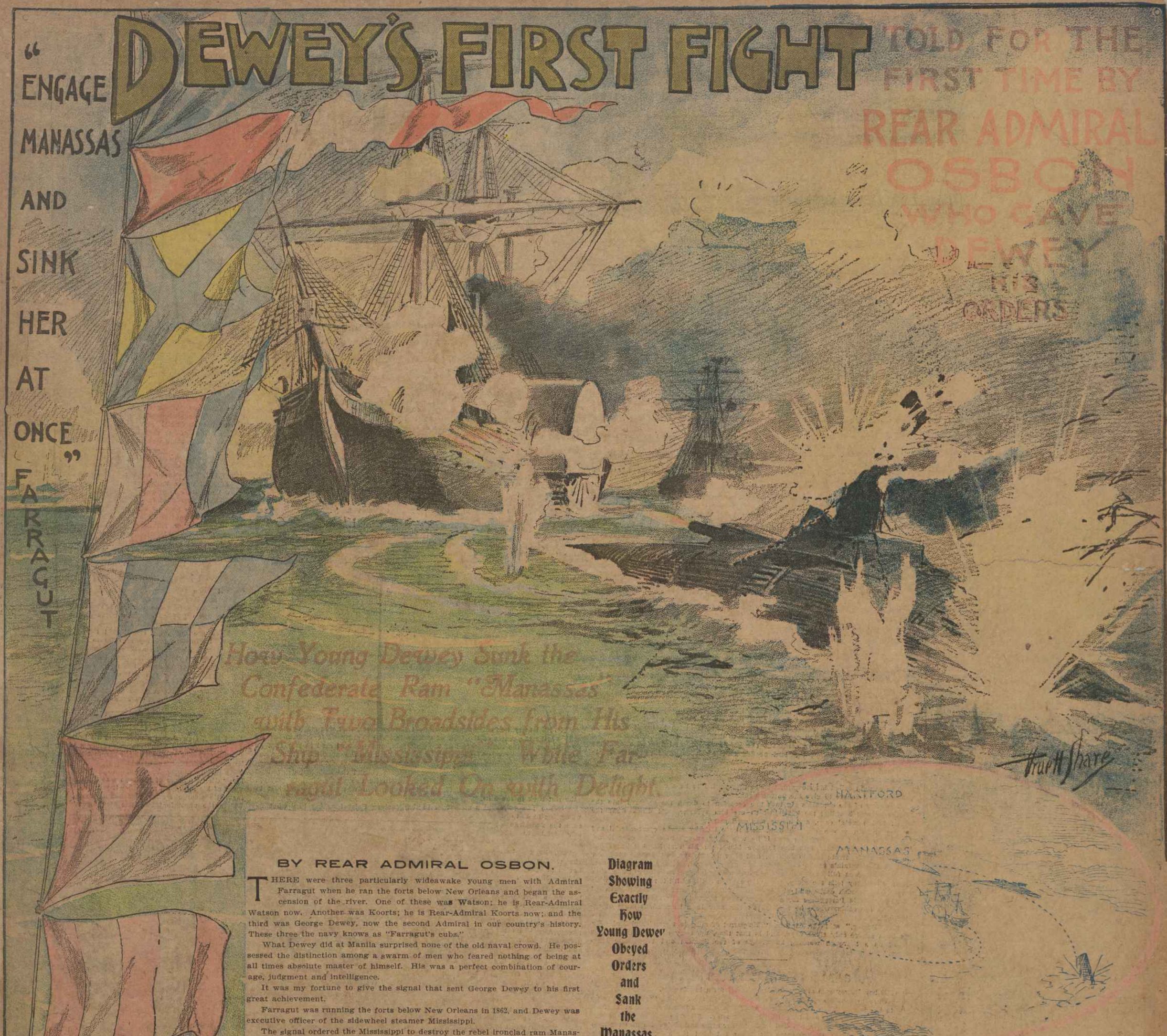
# DEWEY'S FIRST FIGHT

"ENGAGE MANASSAS AND SINK HER AT ONCE" FARRAGUT

TOLD FOR THE FIRST TIME BY REAR ADMIRAL OSBON WHO GAVE DEWEY HIS ORDERS



*How Young Dewey Sunk the Confederate Ram "Manassas" with Two Broadsides from His Ship "Mississippi" While Farragut Looked On with Delight.*





BY REAR ADMIRAL OSBON.

THERE were three particularly wideawake young men with Admiral Farragut when he ran the forts below New Orleans and began the ascension of the river. One of these was Watson; he is Rear-Admiral Watson now. Another was Koorts; he is Rear-Admiral Koorts now; and the third was George Dewey, now the second Admiral in our country's history. These three the navy knows as "Farragut's cubs."

What Dewey did at Manila surprised none of the old naval crowd. He possessed the distinction among a swarm of men who feared nothing of being at all times absolute master of himself. His was a perfect combination of courage, judgment and intelligence.

It was my fortune to give the signal that sent George Dewey to his first great achievement.

Farragut was running the forts below New Orleans in 1862, and Dewey was executive officer of the sidewheel steamer Mississippi.

The signal ordered the Mississippi to destroy the rebel ironclad ram Manassas, which was steaming at us, and it didn't take the Mississippi twenty minutes to carry out the order in the most magnificent and spectacular style.

Melancthon Smith was the Mississippi's commander, but Dewey was the executive officer in more senses than the official one. His was the mind that saw the opportunity for a brilliant thing, and no man ever made more of his opportunity. His commander knew genius when it came under his eye, and trusted Dewey utterly.

It was on the morning of April 24, 1862, a dark, foggy morning with the night not yet out of it. The fleet was steaming up in a double line, hammering Fort Jackson on the west bank and Fort St. Philip on the starboard side. The smoke from funnels and guns hung over the river and there were indications of a very hot time to come further up. The Hartford, Farragut's flagship, was the last of the line on one side and the Mississippi had the same position on the other. This was the station of greatest danger, for in running forts it is the last ship that comes in for most of the peppering. We had been fighting forts, rams, war ships and fire rafts and our wooden ships bristled with plugs driven in to fill shot holes, and we had been on fire so much that it had lost its novelty. The enemy afloat had been pretty well cleaned out below us, but just at dawn I caught sight of the Manassas sneaking out from the shore and heading for us, intent on ramming the stern off the Hartford.

"Flag Officer," I called—Farragut was called flag officer then—"here's the Manassas again!"

"Make a signal," he answered, "to the—looking around to see what ship was available for the job—to the Mississippi to sink that fellow!"

Up went my flags. The first, the pennant, told the Mississippi she was meant, and the message followed directing her to engage the Manassas and sink her.

The flag halliards were not taut when the Mississippi's helm went down hard and she was coming around as quick as her big paddle wheels could drive her. The Mississippi was the only paddle-wheel steamer there, the Hartford, Brooklyn, Richmond and Pensacola all being screw boats that could not turn as quickly and were less fit for the manoeuvre. The Mississippi was a little ahead of us, but she was able to get around to the enemy first, or the old man would not have given the job of tackling that railroad-iron-covered thing to anybody else.

The Mississippi, swinging in a circle, took a little time, and we watched her with one eye, while the other was keeping track of the ram. The Manassas was low on the water and her sloping roof was covered with iron, bolted and dovetailed.

We knew very little about ironclads, and there were many at that time who thought the railroad iron would turn anything we might fire at it from our ships and come right on and sink any wooden vessel. The Manassas was not much of a gun boat. She had just one big gun which she poked out of a port on the bow and fired. The recoil would pull the muzzle of the gun back inside and a shutter would drop like an eyelid, so there was no way to hurt her unless we pierced her armor. We knew her pretty well by this time. She had tried to ram the Brooklyn, but was too close, and she had shouldered a big fire raft right under our starboard bow and set the Hartford ablaze. We could not drive her off, so I knelt on the deck and pulled the plugs out of three big shells. It was a ticklish time. Farragut saw me kneeling there and exclaimed:

"Well, well, Mr. Osbon, this is no time to pray."

"Just wait a moment, Flag Officer, and you'll hear the loudest answer to a prayer that ever you heard."

Then overboard went the shells into the heart of the burning tar barrels, cotton and oil, and the explosion of the shells blew the whole side out of the fire ship and scared the Manassas away. She didn't know what was happening.

So we knew the Manassas pretty well.

The Mississippi did not have far to go. As soon as she was about she began to angle off down the river direct for the ram. Just imagine a great big ferryboat, with paddle wheels reaching above the deck, running down the Katahdin and you will have some idea of how it looked to us on the Hartford. The single gun of the ram spoke, but this was only a sort of challenge. She was bound for the Hartford and meant to drive her steel beak into her. It was all close work, no 4,000-yard ranges such as the tools the boys have to work with nowadays make possible. The whole thing could have been enclosed by a circle a few hundred yards in dimension. We were not a hundred yards from them ourselves when the Mississippi opened out.

She came right on to the Manassas and then sheered aside and from the shortest range let go her port broadside. She had to depress her guns and shoot right down on the ram.

She carried twelve eight-inch Paxham guns, six on a side, and she fired solid balls of iron. They were not the steel armor-piercing projectiles of to-day, of course, but spheres, and they were good enough for the railroad iron. The Mississippi had evidently extra charged her guns, and when those six huge masses of metal came together against the Manassas's side they bent the iron rails wherever they hit, and the ends of the long railroad irons flew outward, pulling bolts as if they had been pins and ripping bands as if they had been paper.

The crash and impact was tremendous. We were used to noise and could judge. The iron globes smashing on the bent rails threw them up and scattered them like a bundle of laths dropped from a ten-story building. The air was full of flying sparks. The broadside staggered the ram and she began to back out of the way. The Mississippi swung around and at almost equally close range let her have the starboasd broadside full on the slope where the rails had been bent, twisted and broken by the first flight of eight-inch shot.

The effect of this second discharge was wonderful and intensely satisfactory to us on the Hartford who watched it and saw this mysterious terror reduced to a stack of old rails, tangled, twisted, confused and all askew. After the second discharge the Manassas was dangerous only to the men on board of her. Her commander saw it was all up with his ram and made haste to run her ashore. They drove her nose up on the bank as far as they could, opened the shutter of the single port and began to scramble out anyhow.

The ships in those days had no secondary batteries, or we could have killed the last man of them. The Mississippi was preparing to capture the wreck and riddled craft when the current pulled her off the bank and she drifted down a little way and sank, the boilers exploding as she went down.

The Mississippi had no bridge and the Captain fought her from the poop deck. Dewey was either on the poop with Melancthon Smith or on the main deck, but the smoke hid them from our sight after the first broadside.

The whole performance was just like Dewey. He did not know how dangerous the ram was, but he realized that hesitation was certainly fatal. If the Manassas had ever got a clear chance at the old paddle-wheel steamer it would have cut her in two with a blow. The only chance was the one she took, to make fight for the ram and at a range so close that the projectiles she could fire would have the greatest penetration, and batter the ram to pieces before it could deliver a return.

The celerity with which Dewey, for the executive officer directed the plans, carried out the order that fluttered from the Hartford filled all with admiration. It was not twenty minutes from the time the Mississippi got the word that she was back in the line doing her share to smash the forts, and the once threatening Manassas was a wreck in the mud at the bottom of the river.

It was Dewey's baptism of fire, and nobly he acquitted himself. Later, when the Mississippi went down a riddled wreck herself, Dewey was the last man to leave her. I did not see that, but in all our Admiral's career there is nothing finer to my mind than the destruction of that ugly rail-ribbed ram below New Orleans.




**Diagram Showing Exactly How Young Dewey Obeyed Orders and Sank the Manassas.**